

The Depiction of Black and White Women Relation in *Mrs. Lincoln's Dressmaker* Novel Written by Jennifer Chiaverini

Olivia Herin Tanoboleng¹

¹English Literature Study Program, Language and Literature Department
Faculty of Humanities University of Halu Oleo
Corresponding Email: oliviaherin14@gmail.com

Abstract

This study tried to analyze black and white women's depiction in the novel *Mrs. Lincoln's Dressmaker* (2013) written by Jennifer Chiaverini. Theory hegemony was used to be a tool of analysis of this study. This study found that, first, the depiction of black and white women. The black woman is depicted as beautiful in the beauty standard of white women; the White woman is depicted as a beautiful woman who is good at politics, second, the relation of those women in the context of position; Mistress vs Servant and Deceiver is Deceived. Mistress is depicted through the white woman character who is kind and great in politics, while the servant is depicted through the black character who is skilled at needle arts. The deceiver is depicted through the white woman who deceives a black woman, while the deceived is a black woman who is deceived by the white woman. This study may conclude that the novel *Mrs. Lincoln's Dressmaker* is a medium to build and maintain the hegemony of white supremacy by the white writer through rewriting the black memoir.

Keywords: *black stereotype, hegemony, novel, the black and white women relation, ideology, white supremacy*

INTRODUCTION

Black and White women in American society are used to being considered unequal. Black women are constructed differently from white women since they have different skin color and their experiences as enslaved people in America. Black women were the product of slavery and they inherited the legacy of slavery; such as discrimination, violence, and labeling. Meanwhile, white women have had privileges since they are white and America is considered and remained as a white country (Blauner, in Hamidjojo, 1981: 2). The implication of their differences in race and experience in the USA, Black and White women are used to being unbalanced in treatment, labeling, and also representation in media. White women, though they also perceive a gender problem in a Western patriarchal society, they get a better experience than those Black. Even in some media, the representation of black and white women built in a very big gap to identify that black is worse than white or white is superior to

black women due to their physical appearance; skin color, and other psyche attributes. *Mrs. Lincoln Dressmaker* (2013), differently, represents the intimate relation of Mary Todd Lincoln with Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley. It is one of the slavery-themed novels written by Jennifer Chiaverini, a white woman author. The novel actually rewrote Madam Elizabeth Keckley's memoir as an ex-slave, in a book entitled "*Behind the Scene: Thirty Years a Slave, Four Years in the White House* (1868). The novel retold the story through Elizabeth Keckley's point of view and exposed the close and intimate relationship between Mary Todd Lincoln (Mrs. Lincoln), the spouse of the American president, Abraham Lincoln, and her seamstress named Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley (Lizzy), a black woman. Based on the elaboration above, the depiction of black and white women relation in *Mrs. Lincoln Dressmaker* reflects the effort to persist white supremacy by the process of instilling white ideology and subjectivity in the novel. White supremacy is an ideology that glorifies whiteness for the purpose of maintaining and defending a system of power and privilege (Martinez, 1998). Therefore, this study will try to scrutinize the depiction of black and white women relation through characters Elizabeth Keckley and Mary Todd Lincoln in the novel *Mrs. Lincoln Dressmaker*. This depiction enables the analysis on seeing the persistence of white ideology in the novel.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study is included in library research type with applying descriptive qualitative methods. Library research is a type of research that involves a collection of several textbooks, Journals, articles, virtual resources, and internet access. In this research, the researcher used the Hegemony theory which was proposed by Antonio Gramsci to analyze *Mrs. Lincoln's Dressmaker* novel. The data source in this research was taken from the text of the novel *Mrs. Lincoln's Dressmaker* by Jennifer Chiaverini which was published in 2013 by Dutton. The data collection techniques were carried out by reading the novel several times, take-nothing, and identifying and grouping the data. Technical analysis of the data in this research is done by presenting the data, explaining the data, and making conclusions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of black and white women in this study is focused on the two main characters; Elizabeth Keckley as Black and Mary Todd Lincoln as a white woman. They both represented the characterization of how being black and white in the novel.

The Depiction of Black Woman

Depiction of the black woman in this study is traced through the physical appearances, skill, as well as mentality. In the novel, Elizabeth's character is depicted as a beautiful, skilled, hard worker, and confident woman. She owes the quality of self through her experience in her life and the effort to be an independent woman. Elizabeth is described as a stylish woman, intelligent, perfectly regular, and 'beautiful' as seen as in the sentence below:

“Lizzie—— is a stately, stylish woman. Her cheek is tawny, but her features are perfectly regular, her eyes dark and winning; hair straight, black, shining. A smile half sorrowful and wholly sweet makes you love her face as soon as you look at it. It is a face strong with intellect and heart, with enough of beauty left to tell you that it was more beautiful still before wrong and grief had shadowed it.” (Chiaverini 2013: 87)

The sentences above are written by Ms. Ames, a dark-haired white woman of about thirty years, who had asked and met Elizabeth directly at her boarding house. The word stylish refers to the people who know about trends and are branded the most. In the cover of the novel, it showed the picture of Elizabeth wearing a white negligee that fits her body. The hairstyle is tied to a simple bun style. The style described in the novel by the white woman reflects the fashionable standard based on the white skin criteria. The use of the words of a stylish woman is actually referred to as the attribute of a white. For a black former slave becoming a stylist implies that not only white could have the attribute of beauty. However, even a person from a minority race, class social, or gender could have it.

The word 'tawny' cheek means the cheek has a brown or tan color. It is described by the white woman who doesn't say Elizabeth has black or dark cheeks but chooses the word tawny which means tan. Tan or brown means a color that is lighter than black and closer to a light color in that it almost resembles the standard beauty of a white woman. It's a way of defending white supremacy and defending black stereotypes in a subtle way so that people who read it won't notice when they're reading it. Her hair is straight, black, and shining. The straight hair which is portrayed in the novel is wavy hair. The image of black, straight, and shining hair is actually an image of white women in America. The image of black slaves is always portrayed in a very poor and low-key manner such as curly hair, black skin, ugly face, fat or big body. The way how to define a black former who really wants to equalize a different race. In this way, when the reader reads it, they will think that the white people's perspective does not distinguish other minor races. In other words, there is no assumption that one race is superior to another. Every race is the same and equal. She is stately, hair straight,

black, and shining. Those words refer to beauty and good appearance. A stately person means calm, beautiful, interesting. It can be concluded that those words refer to the terms *black is beautiful*, which means this is the way for black people to realize their skin color and to exist in America.

Depiction of White Woman

The white woman in this novel is represented through Mary Todd Lincoln. She was the first lady, wife of American resident Abraham Lincoln. Her life was glamorous, she is beautiful, powerful and a devoted wife for the president. Mary Todd Lincoln is a beautiful white woman. She is said to be beautiful because she has beautiful eyes, delicate skin, dark and straight hair, a charming voice, and a keen gaze.

“When she knocked upon the door, a cheerful voice invited her to enter, and when she stepped into the room, she found herself face to-face with a dark-haired woman just over forty, inclined to stoutness but with a lovely complexion and clear blue eyes that boasted a quick, keen gaze.” (Chiaverini 2013: 31)

These sentences showed the image of the first lady, who is very beautiful, who has a very good appearance, interesting physical features which are from a cheerful voice, dark-haired, a lovely complexion and clear blue eyes. The physical attributes of the white woman's beauty as the ideal body. Marry Lincoln was a powerful woman. She had the power of being the first lady and for that, she usually helped the contraband from war and had to support the president in making the government decisions.

“Mrs. Lincoln was, as she had always been, a patriotic Unionist, and although the president's cabinet repeatedly thwarted her efforts to influence her husband on policy matters, she used her position to support the Union cause in other ways. She hosted dinners for dignitaries and, hoping to raise people's spirits, she arranged for the Marine Band to perform concerts every Wednesday and Saturday when the White House grounds were open to the public. She toured regimental encampments and visited soldiers in the hospital, often distributing delicacies from the White House kitchen and gardens with her own hands. She obtained weapons from the War Department and had them sent to a Union colonel in her home state of Kentucky along with a sincere, heartfelt letter professing her admiration for him as well as her loyalty and love for the nation. She reviewed troops with her husband and was charmed when an army colonel broke a bottle of champagne over a carriage to christen the field where his men were bivouacked as “Camp Mary” in her honor.” (Chiaverini 2013: 58)

These sentences showed the first lady, Mary Todd Lincoln's greatness, diligence and how she played the role as the ideal first lady and the wife of a president, who can take any actions in order to support the government. This is clear that the author tried to reveal the good side of

the first lady in the beginning of the story of her character. Mary Todd Lincoln is a white woman, who has the power and intelligence to be a wife of the leader. A great unionist means as much as an army for a union or a region. Her name could be the name of the army's camp which is a sign of the honor of armies because of her help. Mrs. Lincoln is a devoted person who cares about her husband's taste and happiness. She proved a good mother for their children and still a great wife for the president. This is a way to defend white supremacy where she is exposed to her kindness and concern as a human being.

The Black and White Women Relation

The relation of black and white women in the novel kept signifying and strengthening the social relation as dominant and subordinate ones in Black and white relation. Black in the novel kept signifying the subordinate and white as mistress though the specific relation; the mistress vs. servant, and deceiver versus deceived. In the mistress vs servant relationship, white women as mistress treat black women as a servant very well. This shows the superiority of a white person who reflects the superior race. Then, the black woman as the servant who feels treated well by the white mistress, then she also indirectly admits that the white mistress is really good, thus creating a relationship of deceiver and deceived.

Mistress vs Servant

The relationship between the mistress and the servant in the novel indicates a very close relationship with each other. This is a relationship that is not usual with the relationship of the waitress and the servant in general. The relationship between Mary Lincoln and Elizabeth Keckley is increasing significantly. The loneliness and being alone was felt by Mrs. Lincoln, but Elizabeth was there to accompany her as her friend, who is the wife of American president, Abraham Lincoln, a white woman. The sentence can be seen below:

Her husband, so that she had to struggle against his aides even for control over the very White House functions for which she played hostess. Excluded .., missing her departed sisters and cousins, disdained by the popular ladies of Washington, Mrs. Lincoln often told Elizabeth—sometimes sadly, sometimes in defiance—that Elizabeth was her only true friend within a hundred miles. (Chiaverini 2013: 48)

After choosing Elizabeth as the dressmaker, Mrs. Lincoln then told Elizabeth that she is the true friend. For people caught up in racist ideologies, of course not maybe let a black slave former to be a true friend of a white woman with the highest social status as the first lady. However, Mrs. Lincoln allowed that to happen. Both things, namely saying Elizabeth is the

true friend, are unclear actions that describe attempts to treat people black people more humanely with the aim of promoting equal rights for fellow human beings. However, on closer inspection, the thing that is shown by the novel is to see how Elizabeth gets into the new system adopted by Mrs. Lincoln's account, Thus, this shows that the superiority of whites is difficult to conquer.

As the weeks went by, Elizabeth took on other duties within the White House, such as running errands for Mrs. Lincoln and tending to Willie and Tad,.. She can also brush the president's hair. (Chiaverini 2013: 42)

From this sentence, we can conclude that Elizabeth being so close with the White House Family, even could brush the president's hair and what she does is voluntary, without any forces, agreement or additional job to be paid by Mrs. Lincoln. This showed us that the relationship of the mistress and servant is so romantic. Elizabeth handed other duties within the white house just like running errands and tending to Willie and Tad showed us that she has capability in the household beside the needle arts. It can be concluded that all the praises and descriptions of Elizabeth in the novel are a way of maintaining white supremacy and showing a very subtle black stereotype, namely through depicting Elizabeth's extraordinariness in the household and sewing (domestic work), while the depiction of white women as a mistress is someone who takes control and is clever in politics.

"The First Lady, pale and drawn, had already chosen a black dress and bonnet and was awaiting Elizabeth in her boudoir. "I cannot help but think of all we have passed through since we last welcomed a New Year," she murmured as Elizabeth buttoned her dress up the back. "Every day from now until spring will mark an unhappy anniversary." Elizabeth knew she was thinking in particular of Willie's death. "When the first anniversary of my son's passing came, I made sure to keep busy." In truth, the day that she suffered the worst was not the anniversary of the date he had fallen on the field but rather the day she had received the letter announcing his death." (Chiaverini, 2013: 104)

From the sentence above, it can be shown that the relationship between the mistress and the waitress are close. It can be seen through the way Mrs. Lincoln told Elizabeth that 'we have passed through..'. It means that Mrs. Lincoln always involved Elizabeth in every occasion of her life since Elizabeth became her seamstress. Here, the author tries to show the 'new' threatened by a mistress to the servant because there's an unusual relationship between both which is so romantic. It can be seen below:

"You've heard from the Treasury Department," Elizabeth said flatly. "I didn't get the job." "I'm very sorry, Elizabeth," said Mrs. Lincoln. "All agreed that your qualifications are exemplary, but I'm told the cutting-room supervisor had some...reservations. He had his current employees' feelings to consider." Immediately Elizabeth understood, and she

felt humiliated forever entertaining the slightest expectation of being offered the position. "His other employees don't wish to work side-by-side with a woman of color." (Chiaverini, 2013: 112)

More than that, when Elizabeth was in trouble, the method used by Mrs. Lincoln continued to dominate Elizabeth by showing her care for Elizabeth and explained the real conditions for the status of black people "His other employees don't wish to work side-by-side with a woman of color ". That's also what made Elizabeth want to obey Mrs. L to be his subordinate for Mrs. Lincoln is no longer the first lady. Besides, it still alludes to the same thing as that explained in the previous subsection, namely the abolition of slavery, that done by Mrs. Lincoln can be seen as one way of his propaganda to abolish slavery. Elevation of Elizabeth's status in working with Mrs. Lincoln, then his concern to help get his job is explicit form shown to raise the issue of that removal. However, although it is explicitly described as such, it is actually a picture of the abolition of slavery emphasizes the existence of a slavery system that still happening between blacks and whites.

"Mrs. Lincoln had returned to Washington with a new plan to help Elizabeth out of her troubling circumstances. In conversation with the staff at a field hospital, she had been informed about a new law that entitled Elizabeth, as a widow whose only son had been killed in action, to a government pension. "All you need to do is apply at the United States Pension Office," Mrs. Lincoln assured her. "In my opinion, it is the very least the nation can do to express our gratitude for your sacrifice." Elizabeth thanked her, and as soon as she could, she went to the appropriate office and collected the necessary forms." (Chiaverini, 2013: 114)

Mrs. Lincoln doesn't give up on helping Elizabeth. She tried to find a way to help her. Again, the good action in helping a black woman was done by her. She ordered Elizabeth to apply at the Retirement Office in the United States to honor her sacrifice. Elizabeth is told in the novel, she is so humanized by Mrs. Lincoln. he is considered a sacrifice for the country because of the death of George, his son. Once again, this depiction shows that the superiority of a race still lingers in the western world, especially America. There are two reasons why Elizabeth should not be able to apply to the US retirement office, among them is, first, in the novel, Elizabeth would never have been able to apply at the US retirement office if it weren't for Mrs. Lincoln the white woman. It was because of the white woman's kindness that he was able to apply at the office and get help. and secondly, Elizabeth will not be able to because she is a black woman, where the stereotypical image of a black person in society is seen as a negative and unreasonable being.

While, white women are considered a good creation, deserve to be the leader of the future, they have such good attitudes, good intellectuals, and are also good ethnic, and are also innocent. They are innocent is proven by the sentence below; When Elizabeth is helped by Mrs. Lincoln to apply at the retirement office, she doesn't know that a woman of color will be questioned. It was as if, in the eyes of one Mrs. Lincoln there would be no difference before the law between blacks and whites. In this case, the form of help offered by Mrs. Lincoln the white woman is only limited to payment because she has given birth to her son to serve the country, not because she has contributed to the country because she has sacrificed her child on the battlefield. Not only that, Elizabeth should lie to get the pension. She should deny that George is a *mulatto*, the son of the marriage between Elizabeth and her old master.

“Elizabeth packed Mrs. Lincoln’s trunks for her, and on the day of her departure, Elizabeth came to the White House to see her off. “You should come with me,” Mrs. Lincoln urged again, as she had several times before. “I feel so much better in your company.” Elizabeth was tempted, but she had accepted too much work from her other clients to pack a bag and quit the city on such short notice. “I wish I could,” she said, “but my commitments oblige me to stay behind.” ... As Elizabeth walked along the curved path in front of the White House on her way home, she heard a man behind her remark to a companion, “The Hellcat gave the Tycoon quite a scare, didn’t she?”” (Chiaverini, 2013: 127)

From the sentence above, it clearly portrays the relation of both black and white women. Mrs. Lincoln seems to force Elizabeth to join her, to accompany her because she feels better when Elizabeth is around her. Here is the picture of the person who is being deceived and the person who is deceiver. From the sentence above also, Elizabeth get furious of the men whose use bad word to describe Mrs. Lincoln in her presence. And for that she had the courage to bet those men. depiction of goodness and positive side Mrs. Lincoln is very clear because it is recognized by his own servant, namely Elizabeth the black woman. Therefore, Elizabeth's testimony of the kindness of Mrs. Lincoln is a method used by the author of the novel to highlight the superiority of whites over the inferiority of blacks.

CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that the depiction of black and white women in Mrs. Lincoln's Dressmaker was presented in an attempt to strengthen white supremacy. This is because the representation of the white woman character in the novel is described as a woman who is great, courageous, skilled, independent, a prosperous businesswoman, stylish, black and shining. The image of a beautiful black woman shows the black stereotype that is starting to

change. Meanwhile, the image of a white woman in the novel through the character of Mrs. Lincoln, was a great political, beautiful and also a devoted wife. This image shows the preservation of white supremacy. The depiction of these two images ultimately leads us to a view that even though black women are great and extraordinary, without the recognition and help of white women, they will still not develop. In this case, it can be said that the defense of white supremacy has been strengthened, and stereotypes of black women still exist, but in a very subtle way. From the description it can also be concluded that white women deserve to be helpers and black women deserve to be helped. This study finds that the relationship between the two women actually reveals the romantic and intimate relationship between the mistress and the servant as the author's attempt to maintain white ideology through white characters. Besides that, the representation of both relations depicted the deceiver and deceived. Where, the white woman as the mistress deceived the black woman as the servant. Thus, indicating the existence of racial dominance, or the existence of a stronger and superior race that was revealed through this research.

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